

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease: Questions and Answers

Q. What is rabbit hemorrhagic disease?

A. Rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHD) is a highly infectious viral disease of the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*). This is the species from which all U.S. domestic and commercial rabbits are derived. American cottontail rabbits and jackrabbits are not susceptible to RHD.

Q. Does this disease affect people?

A. No.

Q. Does RHD affect other animals?

A. No.

Q. What are the clinical signs of RHD?

A. Rabbits die suddenly within 6 to 24 hours of the onset of a fever with few other clinical signs. Fever may be as high as 105 °F, but often is not detected until rabbits show terminal clinical signs. RHD damages the liver and intestines and causes significant hemorrhage (bleeding) into many different organs. The death rate ranges from 50 to 100 percent.

Q. Is there an effective treatment?

A. No.

Q. Is there a vaccine?

A. No vaccine is legally available for use in the United States. Vaccine has been used in parts of the world where the disease occurs in wild rabbits. Vaccination can reduce the number of rabbits dying from RHD but cannot eradicate the disease. Rabbits vaccinated against RHD may become infected but not show signs of disease, thereby allowing spread of the virus as a carrier.

Q. How is RHD spread?

A. RHD is highly contagious. Large amounts of virus are passed in the droppings of infected rabbits. The virus can then be spread onto the food of healthy rabbits, infecting them following exposure to or consumption of the food. The virus can also be spread by contact with rabbit products (such as hides and meat), rodents, and contaminated objects, such as

cages, feeders, and clothing. Contaminated objects may be a source of spread if not properly cleaned and disinfected.

Q. What precautionary measures can be taken to prevent RHD?

A. To stop the spread of the disease, breeders and pet owners should prevent contact between healthy rabbits and infected rabbits and contaminated objects (e.g., cages, feeders, and clothing). Where the health status of a rabbit is unknown, keep in mind that healthy-appearing rabbits can be in the early stages of the disease and cause it to spread later. Additionally, recovered rabbits appear healthy but can be carriers and spread the disease to other rabbits.

Owners should be cautious and isolate new rabbits and rabbits returning from shows for at least 5 days prior to returning them to the herd. Owners should also routinely clean and disinfect all equipment. After thorough cleaning, disinfect all equipment with a solution of 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water.

Q. How should suspected cases of RHD be reported?

A. Veterinarians and rabbit owners who suspect that a rabbit may have RHD should immediately contact State or Federal animal health authorities.

For More Information

For more information on RHD, contact:
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Veterinary Services, Emergency Management
4700 River Road, Unit 41
Riverdale, MD 20737-1231
Telephone: (301) 734-8073
Fax: (301) 734-7817

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